



# **The Pan-African Parliament**

Is it worth it?

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The people of Africa may be forgiven for letting last week's election of a new leadership of the Pan-African Parliament pass without much fanfare. While OAU's successor, the African Union (AU), has done much to combat issues such as HIV/AIDS and malaria across the continent, its flagship project, the PAP, continues to languish on the periphery of African politics.

Unfortunately, the Parliament is still without a proper home, with no word on when construction will start on its proposed multimillion-rand building in Midrand, Johannesburg, as its budget was cut drastically by the AU earlier this year; it is still looking for a permanent clerk; and last week's elections were scheduled despite no candidates being available as none of the PAP's 265 MPs from 46 African countries were told to prepare for elections. While such quirks of procedure are nothing new for students of parliamentary politics, such directionless policy-making and poor planning is fast becoming the defining character of an institution that was meant to be exercising full legislative powers as a continental administrator by March 2009, according to its original mandate.

At the time of this writing, the PAP's own Web site is hosting a poll that asks, "Has the AU made a good contribution to peace and security in Africa?" Forty-four percent say yes, while another 44 percent disagree, suggesting that the PAP has a long way to go in convincing respondents of its worthwhile role in pan-African politics.

But the question is whether the PAP can ever become what it aspires to be, which it states is "an institution with full legislative powers...[which will] provide a common platform for African peoples and their grassroots organizations to be more involved in discussions and decision-making on the problems and challenges facing the continent." Moreover, what is the point? Isn't the whole idea, a quasi-federal system loosely based on the European Union, a bad fit for Africa? Or do the founding noble intentions make it a worthwhile investment?

Certainly, there are myriad factors undermining its current operation, so one can certainly not lay the blame solely at the feet of its politicians. It could be argued that it is merely the sum of its parts. Created by the same agreement which saw the establishment of the AU in 2000, PAP members are nominated by the AU member governments rather than being directly elected representatives of the people. It could be said, therefore, that MPs merely represent narrow national interests, rather than those of the people of the continent as a whole, as is the case in the European Union. Additionally, the PAP's rules state the election of its president must be overseen by the AU chairman. The current incumbent, Muammar Gaddafi, is not known for his democratic credentials.

In the absence of promised reform, it is difficult to see how the parliament can fulfill its stated vision. This problem was directly addressed by Ghana's vice president, John Mahama, at the opening of the 11th Ordinary Session last week, "The progress on

the African unification project has been frustratingly slow,” he stated. “We have parochially clung to our little flags and national anthems without seeing the advantages a more united Africa offers us. ... All that Africans want is a continent where they can hold up their heads with dignity and pride as Africans.”

Mahama went on to identify key areas that Africa should focus on in the current global economic climate, picking out agriculture as the key driver of progress. He criticized the billions of dollars spent annually on food imports when money could be saved if African countries improved their agricultural activities. He claimed, “The food crisis must reveal to us that the abandoned and long-suffering African farmer must become a focus of our attention. We must assist our farmers to modernise and increase productivity in order to be able to feed us.”

However, in its current guise, it is extremely doubtful whether the PAP can play a meaningful role in fulfilling this ambition. As PAP (now ex-) President Gertrude Mongella, herself criticized by PAP MPs for poor leadership, identified in her opening speech, the current concerns of the PAP are much more mundane. “Among the key challenges are resource (finance, human and technical) mobilisation and capacity building,” she stated. She then went on to say, quite astutely and honestly, “Sometimes these imperfections tend to eclipse or even ridicule the many successes we have achieved. The good thing, however, is that all of us are aware of these shortcomings and are also aware of the efforts being made to resolve them.”

It is doubtful whether merely having an “awareness of the efforts” to build up the PAP is what is required to turn the parliament into a fully operational legislative body. Indeed, such ambiguity from the leadership has led many to criticize the institution and its executive – the AU itself demanded new elections be held to renew the PAP’s mandate as far back as January. And in this session, many MPs angrily called for and adopted a motion setting the tenure of PAP’s parliamentary committees and its five-member executive committee at three years, rather than the previous five. MPs were reacting to the leadership’s refusal to address the issue of leadership sufficiently on the parliamentary agenda. Whether the new regime, under the leadership of Chad MP Moussa Ndele Indris, will fulfill its pledge to resolve conflicts and improve administration, remains to be seen.

Some suggestions aimed at making the institution more relevant and fit for purpose are a rotational leadership and enhanced financial scrutiny and accountability to counter accusations of poor democratic accountability and financial mismanagement. Giving the PAP some powers over “non-sovereign” issues may be a way of integrating the institution with national government structures and the AU, allowing it to gain meaning and purpose in an organic fashion. Such ideas, however, will most probably take years to come to fruition.

But, putting aside the question of feasibility, the original question is whether the idea of a PAP is even desirable. Does the system fit Africa and is it worth investing in?

For all but the most conservative of commentators, the answer is surely “yes.” Given Africa’s tumultuous history in the latter half of the 20th century, it would be foolish to ignore the lessons of governance from the parts of the world which at that time were embarking on federal projects to mend their economies, societies and political systems which had been shattered by World War II. As a pioneer of the agreement which created the European Union, former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl commented, “We never want to wage war again against each other. We want to honour the dead and tend to the graves but we never again want to have soldiers’ tombs in Europe. That is the most important reason for a united Europe.”

For all its flaws and idiosyncrasies, that is the key lesson of the European Union experiment – it has made unthinkable a norm that dominated regional and global politics for centuries. If Africa is to overturn its own perceived norm of instability and poor governance, it must find its own regional solution. While the PAP may be seriously flawed, its founding vision remains noble and worthwhile. Along with the AU, it can play a major role in bringing peace and stability to the African continent by giving the people a democratic stake in it. The reform necessary to make this happen may be slow, but must be conducted at its own natural pace – the European Union and other regional federal structures, after all, were not created overnight. Refusing to invest or believe in the PAP would be highly irresponsible and runs the risk of repeating the fate of many an African political institution – crumbling at the feet of dominant, self-interested state actors. Such a fate would doom Africa’s people to many repeated ages of hardship.

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